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EDITORIAL

# German Contributions to Mindfulness Research, Part 1: Context and Concept of Mindfulness

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Mindfulness has never been an easy concept to grasp, and to talk about mindfulness is usually even more difficult than experiencing it. Moreover, along with its rapidly growing popularity, whatever is meant by "mindfulness" seems to become even more fuzzy and evasive. One reason for this development might be that the application of mindfulness stretches further every day, and with every new application, the concept changes a little. Mindfulness is often seen as invariant, as being always the same, whether practiced in a Buddhist monastery in India in the first century BC or in a course on management skills in Wisconsin in 2012. One may think that "observing the breath" is "observing the breath," whether long ago or today. But, this is probably only half of the truth. The other half is that the results of mindfulness practice are also determined by *motivational* factors, such as intention and goals (see Schmidt 2011). While the practice of nonjudgmental observation of all present moment experiences may well be the same throughout time and culture, the *intention* related to such a practice is highly dependent on its *context*. It makes a difference whether one seeks spiritual growth and insights, wants to improve coping abilities in the face of a difficult clinical condition, or aims to develop skills for successful professional communication. It is in this sense that it might be helpful to always address mindfulness in the respective context, especially if we want to avoid diluting the meaning associated with the term "mindfulness."

We would like to touch on some major contexts. The oldest one is the context of Buddha's teaching approximately 2,400 years ago in what is today Northern India. Here, the intention was clearly spiritual with the aim of ultimate insight, liberation, and the end of all suffering. This motivation remained throughout history with Buddhism separating and splitting up in many different and often unrelated traditions for more than 2,000 years. Mindfulness received different names, interpretations, and roles within the respective teachings. Different Buddhist traditions came to the West in different waves and forms since the mid-nineteenth century and found quite different cultural backgrounds. Here, contexts got even more diverse due to the many different ways in which Buddhist traditions came to the West (see Nattier 1995, for an inspiring categorization). This diversity in contexts grew by more than a magnitude due to the *secularization* of mindfulness. This started out with *clinical* applications, foremost with the development of Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program. In such a clinical context, mindfulness was practiced with a different intention. Ultimate insights and liberation were replaced by more realistic short-term objectives like stress reduction, the ability to deal with difficult emotions, or pain management. However, for those who showed a deeper interest in the matter, the spiritual aspects were still at hand. But, as we know today, placing mindfulness in clinical contexts was followed by an outspread of mindfulness to multiple contexts, such as education, management, psychology, and cognitive science. It may be due to the generic approach of MBSR and driven by the demands of our fast changing society or both that mindfulness now seems to be omnipresent.

Maybe, in the end, this development will bring mindfulness back to what it was in the beginning—an inner attitude towards all kind of life challenges. However, for the sake of

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understanding and conceptualizing mindfulness from a *research perspective*, we need to consider its context in order not to miss it. Moreover, we also have to consider in further detail what the specific context of research is doing to mindfulness. The dominant science paradigm today is a third-person approach. This means that we talk about observations that can be "objectively" (or maybe better intersubjectively) shared with each other, e.g., measurement results (see Walach 2011 for an outline on how to incorporate a first-person perspective into science). But, the practice of mindfulness does not comply with this standard. A first-person experience can never be fully caught in language. Try to explain verbally the taste of chocolate to somebody who has never eaten chocolate, and then give this person a piece of chocolate so she/he can make a first-person experience. This is clearly not the same. So, what we experience by practicing a bare preconceptual attention towards our sensations is impossible to be adequately addressed by our present scientific framework. In order to overcome this problem, we have transferred the first-person *experience* into a third-person *concept*, i.e., the *concept of mindfulness*. This process created a new entity, but this was just the starting point. Once conceptualized within academia, the concept of mindfulness started its own independent life. We developed instruments to measure it, we can assign mindfulness scores to people, we suddenly have trait and state mindfulness, and for all those who have not practiced mindfulness in a formal way yet, we have "dispositional mindfulness."

Such scientific behavior can be seen as one way of opening up mindfulness for our society. Science is the main reference frame for creating meaning and importance in our modern world, and science is also, although this is often not seen directly, a social activity and therefore based on social agreements. Thus, within the scientific context, we speak about the unspeakable, we discuss the preverbal experience, and we draw maps of the concept of mindfulness in relation to other concepts. All these make perfect sense within their respective contexts. But, in order to do good science, it is important to keep this specific context always in mind. The concept of mindfulness is not identical to what we experience when we practice mindfulness. We should not mix the map with the landscape or, as Gregory Bateson has put it, "Don't eat the menu!"

The context of this Special Issue was a conference on clinical mindfulness research, which took place in June 2011 in Bern, Switzerland, organized by an informal network of mindfulness researchers in German-speaking countries, the University Hospital of Psychiatry Bern, Dept. of Psychotherapy (Prof. Dr. W. Tschacher), and the Clinical Psychology Services (Prof. Dr. F. Moggi). This was the third such meeting, following earlier ones in 2008 and 2009. The first two meetings took place in Freiburg, Germany, and were initiated by the Center for Meditation, Mindfulness and Neuroscience Research at the University Medical Center Freiburg. We observed that many, especially young, researchers throughout Germany, Switzerland, and Austria engage in mindfulness research without knowing each other. The idea was to bring people together in a less formal way in order to allow for connecting and networking and thus giving mindfulness research a forum within an academic system that is sometimes resistant to innovation.

We present the contributions from the 2011 conference in two parts in a Special Issue of *Mindfulness*. Part 1 focuses on clinical interventions and related concepts, and part 2 will concentrate more on measuring mindfulness, although not all contributions can be subsumed under these two themes.

This issue begins with an ambitious meta-analysis of the effects of mindfulness meditation and especially MBSR in non-clinical samples by Juliane Eberth and Peter Sedlmeier. Overall, it shows a medium effect size for 38 studies. Especially in MBSR, medium to large effect sizes were found for variables relating to stress, well-being, and the reduction of negative emotions. It is followed by a theoretical contribution from Johannes Michalak, Jan Burg, and Thomas Heidenreich on the role of the body in the success of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) as relapse prevention. Recent research suggests "embodiment" plays an important role in emotion processing and that MBCT has already incorporated this aspect. Marko Nedeljkovic and colleagues present a controlled trial where 70 participants were randomly assigned either to a 3-month Taiji intervention or to a wait-list control group. Their special focus was on questionnaire data regarding the self-attribution of mindfulness and self-compassion. Katja Lange presents a pilot study assessing the effects of mindfulness on acute pain in a multimodal setting that is tailored to capture pain in all its different aspects. The study by Jörg Herdt and colleagues reports the difficulties in incorporating a mindfulness-based intervention in the regular setting of a psychiatric clinic. They conducted an adapted MBCT program with 120 patients and assessed the factors leading to attrition. Arndt Büssing and colleagues conducted a cross-sectional questionnaire study of 191 beginners of a yoga teacher class. They assessed several concepts such as well-being, mental health, self-attributed mindfulness, and spirituality and related them in regression analyses to their new concept of "inner correspondence." The final paper by Daniel Birrer, Philipp Röthlin, and Gareth Morgan is on the utility of mindfulness in sport psychology and shows, once more, the large variety of potential applications of mindfulness.

## References

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